Dear Friends of the Freshman Research Initiative-

I am delighted to join the College of Natural Sciences at the University of Texas at Austin, as the inaugural executive director of the Texas Institute for Discovery Education in Science, or TIDES. As Dean Linda Hicke announced at the start of the semester, TIDES was proposed in the CNS 2013 Strategic Plan (as the Texas Center for Science Discovery) as a way to continue and enhance the college's leading role in STEM education. TIDES is the new home of the Freshman Research Initiative (FRI) and will serve as a laboratory for science education initiatives in the College – a place to innovate as well as test the efficacy and impact of different educational strategies.

I have been watching FRI for almost a decade since its inception. It is truly unprecedented across the country in terms of its size and scope - involving 800+ undergraduates in research each year, early enough in their education to make a difference. The program prepares student to pursue more advanced research, like Shruti Singh, who was introduced to research through the Aptamer stream, spearheaded by Drs. Andrew Ellington and Gwen Stovall. Ms. Singh went on to be selected as a Summer Research Fellow by the Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine. Participating in FRI has benefits beyond learning what science is and how science is done. As President Powers noted in his recent State of the University address, students who participate in FRI maintain higher GPAs and more finish a science or math degree in a shorter period of time.

It is successes like these that have positioned FRI to be a national model for involving undergraduates in research from when they first set foot on campus. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), which has invested in FRI since its early days, recently endorsed the program in a new and more substantial way. HHMI not only awarded another five-year grant to support FRI, the Maryland-based science philanthropy awarded three additional grants to support the adaptation and implementation of FRI at Iowa State University, SUNY Binghamton, and University of Texas at El Paso. Other universities are adopting this innovative model. We recently hosted a visit from UT Arlington to advise on starting their own FRI.

By the time you read this letter, we will be launching “stream sort” – when we match a new cohort of students to the research projects that interest them. We will also be working with the current cohort to make speedy progress in their research and transition to new opportunities, such as apprenticing with a faculty member on a new research project, serving as a peer mentor for incoming FRI students, or finding other ways to put the science and math they learn in class into practice in the real world. We look forward to sharing updates throughout the year.

Thanks for your support for the Freshman Research Initiative!